



**THE ROAD
TO
NOWHERE**

A JOURNEY THROUGH BOXING'S WASTELANDS

Tris Dixon



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Introduction

THE explosive punches came in thick, fast and were extraordinarily heavy. I felt my brain rattle from one particular dynamite right hand that looped around my left and I did not see coming. I froze but my head pivoted on my neck so I was left looking up at the light above the ring thinking how my grey matter had just been partially crushed.

Once I escaped that violent trance, and the subsequent ambush, I held on and threw hard shots to keep my antagonist at bay for the rest of the round. We did one more, but I don't remember anything about it other than feeling like I had won a world title when the bell sounded. Survival was a victory of sorts, I guess.

Lenord Pierre was a pure puncher. He was being trained by Kevin Rooney and I was sharing the gym in Catskill with them. I'd been in town a few weeks and in the USA for a few days longer.

The next afternoon, I was terrified as I waited for Pierre at the gym. He did not show for the morning run and, as I gasped through the mountains, I could still feel my brain rolling around. It was agony. Perhaps it was a concussion. It hurt. The pain did not subside properly for weeks.

It didn't matter, of course. We were always going to spar again the following day so I got to the gym 15 minutes early.

In many ways the wait for Lenord was worse than the anxious hours before an amateur fight because I *knew* I was going to get a beating. I figured I was game, had a hard head and could punch a bit, which generally saw me getting hit a lot and landing rarely, but Pierre was class. He would go on to box future middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik and, in the pros, he knocked more than one man silly in less than three minutes.

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But, at 3pm, he was not around. My heart was thumping and each time I heard a car pull up my mind was coated with a thick veil of dread. It was no fun waiting for a whipping. Twenty minutes after our agreed meeting time had passed, Lenord emerged. I wanted to run like the wind but he said he couldn't spar because his back was sore.

Relieved, I was left to contemplate an extraordinary few weeks.

With my trusty J-reg Ford Escort sold – meaning I was only slightly in the red instead of on the wrong end of a £2,000 overdraft – I'd left England. The plan was to stay in the USA for six months and learn about the sport from the best.

For someone who had less than a penny to his name, six months seemed an awfully ambitious amount of time to spend dawdling in America. In the first few hours after landing in New York there had been train tickets, food and the subway. I knew I would not be earning for some time.

It was five o'clock in the morning when I arrived in Syracuse after an overnight bus ride from the city and no one there had heard of Canastota, let alone the International Boxing Hall of Fame. Surprised and disappointed, I stumbled wearily to a taxi rank and after striking a deal for \$30 I was on my way, petrified that I would be home within a week as I plunged further into debt.

It was dawn at the Hall and everything was shut when I arrived. I knew it would not be open for a while – several hours at least – so I paced through the tidy, old-fashioned town as day broke. I eventually came out the other side, walking up and down the hills that lead to Oneida, the next town along. Shattered, I strolled up to a billboard that warned me of black bears living nearby, walked a hundred yards or so from the roadside verge and tossed my rucksack lazily on to the parched grass.

My head nestled on the padded part of a sparring glove.

A couple of hours later, I retraced my footsteps but felt like a vagrant when I returned to the Hall of Fame with all of my worldly possessions hanging off one shoulder. I scurried to join growing crowds in anticipation of meeting some past greats of the game.

Within two hours I had talked to several old champions.

I spoke with former light-heavyweight champion Matthew Saad Muhammad, ex-heavyweight king Leon Spinks, Scotland's Ken Buchanan, one of the hardest punchers of all time Earnie

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Shavers, the still-fearsome Iran Barkley and Philadelphia's George Benton, a good middleweight who later became an excellent trainer. A day later I was sat at a table with legendary trainers Eddie Futch, Angelo Dundee and Lou Duva. I could never have done that in England but after a few hours in Canastota I had.

Within a day or so, legendary faces had become familiar and friendly ones and featured smiles I'd see over and over for the remainder of the weekend.

Only Barkley proved the exception.

A polite request for a photo saw him try to shake me down for \$10.

The makeshift photographer behind the lens said Iran should have asked me before doing the picture. Barkley looked blank, as if to say, 'Oh yeah.'

Later on I found him and gave him the \$10. I felt sorry for him.

This was a sad business at times. It was called the hurt business and sometimes it did hurt. Considerably. What also hurt was the feeling of money running through my fingers and having very little to show for it.

I'd walk the 30-or-so minutes back to the black bear billboard each night to sleep under the warm blanket of stars, but never once did I see a bear. I don't think I even heard one. There were always plenty of deer around, though.

I shaved in the disabled toilet at the Hall of Fame museum.

And then Sunday afternoon came. The induction ceremonies took place and it was splendid. Among others, Philadelphia bantamweight great Jeff Chandler and Scottish boxing legend Buchanan were enshrined and gave moving speeches. Then they left. Everyone left. Finally, even I was gone.

I was the first person at the Hall of Fame that weekend and the last to leave. I had made one or two friends but as the crowds dispersed I was by myself.

I hitched a ride to Syracuse and jumped on a bus to Catskill. I was on my way to Mike Tyson's old town.

His old trainer, Kevin Rooney, had been expecting me. I had called before I left England and he seemed happy to take a look at me as a fighter even though I admitted to being average at best.

'Let's see,' he said, happily enough.

That was weeks ago, however, and it came as no surprise when I called to remind him of our chat that he didn't recall it.

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He said he would send someone to meet me when I arrived.

Andre Kopilov was a giant Russian heavyweight. He was 6ft 9in or thereabouts, had a black flat-top, a gold Honda 4x4 and didn't provide much change out of 19 stone. His flash vehicle, he told me, had been bought for him by his manager, Bill Cayton, who used to look after Tyson.

Kopilov took me to see Rooney, who was at the local OTB (Off-Track Betting) shop. Andre went in alone and emerged alone. Kevin was gambling and couldn't leave, apparently. But the Russian behemoth had been instructed to take me to the Catskill Motel, as bog-standard a place as you could hope to temporarily reside, and I bartered passionately for them to accept \$150 for the week. Even so, this six months of mine was getting shorter by the hour.

The weeks sped by in Catskill. I moved into a family-run resort, called Forlinis, and helped around the place, taking ice to the bar, cutting the grass and running errands whenever I wasn't training in the once-famous gym above the police station. In exchange, I stayed for a peppercorn rent. They treated me like one of the family and allowed me to share mealtimes, most of which consisted of wonderful old-school Italian delicacies.

In time, I became a familiar face about town and had my hair cut by Bobby Meo, who owned a private barbershop on the main drag and who used to cut Tyson's hair when he lived there. Tyson, he said, was always courteous and used to bring his amateur trophies into the shop to show Bobby's father before he passed away.

I trained with Andre every day. He had a big fight coming up in New York and I was either in the gym or out on the road running with a couple of Kevin's other prospects, a welterweight from New Orleans called Jay Krupp and a Haitian middleweight named Lenord Pierre. Lenord was the one to watch. There were stories around town that he had recently knocked out three cruiserweights in three rounds of sparring. He had that Tyson look, the peekaboo style where you attack and defend from bobbing and weaving positions.

Rooney taught me some of the basics. He did not do pads any longer on account of old injuries. Frankly, aside from drinking, which he did habitually, he did not appear to be in good enough shape to do all that much. He was three times the man he used

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to be but only half the trainer. The boxers, all trying to follow in Mike Tyson's footsteps, had to motivate themselves to train and Kevin was only there when we sparred or if he brought guys in from out of town to work with his men.

Frequently I would bump into him around Catskill – when he was not in OTB and I was not in the gym – and he would be walking with his two giant golden retrievers and a bottle of the hard stuff in a paper bag. He seemed to sweat buckets no matter what time of day it was and regardless of the temperature.

Sure, on the rare occasions when we were in the gym he showed me some things but by then Lenord had taught me almost all of the moves Kevin would demonstrate. In fact, Lenord Pierre took me under his wing. He had an enormous, but affectionate, slobbering Rottweiler and I think Pierre liked me because I was the only one in the gym as often as him.

The others? Well, Jay was in with a bad crowd and Andre seemed homesick. Lenord, though, enjoyed running, training and performing the drills with me.

Everything we did was what Tyson used to do. We sparred in the same dilapidated ring, hit the same dusty old bags and even listened to the same tape in the gym. No, it was not 80s music from back in the day but a cassette created by Tyson's trainer and mentor Cus D'Amato.

It would be played after we'd aligned ourselves with the wall-mounted bags and then Cus, the man responsible for Tyson's incredibly swift ascent to the top, would call out combinations from beyond the grave for us to practise. In the days and weeks there I learned the punches, numbered from one to eight, to an obsessive degree. I had practised the footwork daily and whenever a number was called I knew exactly what to throw. It became an auto-pilot function and doing it two or three times a day allowed it to sink in deeply.

Sometimes it helped but one day Lenord beat me black and blue in the gym and hurt me worse than anyone ever had in the past or would do in the future.

As I waited for him that day, eventually delighted he wouldn't spar because he'd strained his lower back walloping me, the pain in my head did not stop me from reflecting on the best few weeks of my life.

I knew I wanted to be involved in boxing.

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The following day we ran together and I'd help Lenord with exercises for his back as I had my own lingering lumbar injuries.

Sightings of Kevin in the gym were scarce, and Jay's attendance was hit and miss. Andre had been chinned badly in Coney Island but Lenord and I were there every day, more often than not in the morning and the afternoon. One weekend, we got some cleaning kit and polished the whole place down. Every piece of wood flooring, every bag, every bit of kit was meticulously scrubbed. It took hours. I was under the impression it was the first time the gym had ever been cleaned.

It was still more museum than fitness facility. The old yellow clippings on the wall documented Tyson's time there. Rooney's own decent career was also on the equally faded and torn pieces of paper, so were articles on other fighters who had passed through, like Vinny Pazienza and Omar Sheika.

There was press on all of them. But those days were in the past, where this gym seemed to survive from.

After a couple of months or so, Kevin was in the gym one day. I had done some rounds with Lenord, got my ass kicked as normal, and then the trainer called Jay in, not for Lenord but for me.

I was in a dizzy haze and merely greeted Jay's arrival with a shrug. He had the same dip-and-weave style but was not the explosive or powerful hitter Lenord was. He was not the dedicated trainer Pierre was, either, and stood more upright, which suited me. I also knew the fighting style like a cabbie knows a shortcut.

For three rounds, Kevin called out the numbered combinations to Jay and for three rounds I hit him with them before he could get me. I boxed better than I could ever imagine. Better than I dreamt I could.

The numbers were called out and the shots came tumbling from my gloves. Not Jay's, though. He was waiting too long to get his punches off and, of course, I knew what was coming when he did shoot, having learned the codes.

Rooney was pissed off. Jay went back to his corner between rounds and Kevin screamed at him. 'He's only been here a few weeks and he's doing what *you* should be doing.'

I wanted some praise. I had been there, running out of money, training with his guys and trying to keep them motivated when he was not around. I was there whenever they wanted to train or spar and had scrubbed those filthy floorboards until my back was stiff

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and my knees were red raw. Jay was given water between rounds. Rooney, trying to ignite something, cursed him.

Tumbleweed swept through my corner. No one was there. I wanted this to be my home, too, but I was very much the 'away' fighter. Dejected if not heartbroken, at least I knew where I stood.

Round two opened up and despite assuming Jay would come out bombing, the same thing happened. Kevin called the numbers and I let the punches go. Round three, same thing. That was the last round I sparred at Catskill and, at its conclusion, I felt absolutely worthless, despite boxing better than I ever thought I could.

While Rooney tore into Jay, he could barely manage a cursory 'well done' nod in my direction. Lenord patted me on the back and Krupp embraced me as most fighters do following a good spar. Still, I had gone from camp insider to camp outsider in three short rounds.

I had learned their techniques and felt ready to move on to another city and another gym where I could use that system to my benefit. I decided to leave, telling the guys I was going to Atlantic City and a day or so later Kevin was drinking in Forlinis. I was bringing some ice into the bar when he said, 'I hear you're leaving town.'

I nodded coldly, fearing he would demand an explanation.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Atlantic City,' I said.

'Do you gamble?'

'No.'

'Well, why are you going there? There's nothing there but gambling.'

I knew there were boxing gyms there. I also knew Matthew Saad Muhammad had said he'd train me if I could get there.

'For a change of scene,' I squirmed, avoiding confrontation.

And that was about it. I left the next day.

Atlantic City was a hell hole, really, but it was home to me for a while and I consequently developed a strange, sickly affinity with it. At first I trained at the Police Athletic League Gym with lightweight contender Leavander Johnson and up-and-coming welterweight Shamone Alvarez, then, a year later, I was over at the Pleasantville Rec Center with Ray Mercer, Virgil Hill and Al Cole.

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During different stints on the East Coast I had been to train at Joe Frazier's Gym in Philadelphia, Gleason's in New York and scores of other smaller, lesser-known haunts where I found the Catskill style did not work as well as I hoped it might.

Annoyingly, other trainers tried to 'correct' the way I had been taught in Catskill. They reckoned I was too flat-footed and generally too square on, rendering Rooney's part-time teachings redundant.

I worked with Bill Johnson, Leavander's dad, and a few of the other trainers at the PAL.

As he promised, Saad Muhammad coached me several times. Saad had done quite well as a trainer but couldn't hold on to the guys he was bringing through. They left for bigger if not necessarily better things. Besides, Saad, one the most exciting fighters the sport had seen, was a local celebrity and it's hard to get quality gym time with someone who is constantly harassed for old war stories.

I was meeting lots of people and making some good connections but making little progress from a career perspective. I had lived the dream and survived for so long with so little, experiencing genuine hardship as a homeless and hungry traveller.

I had slept in boxing gymnasiums, in fields in Mark Twain country in upstate New York, on river banks in the Hudson Valley, at the top of the Rocky steps of the famous art museum in Philadelphia, on the beach and beneath the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, in Central Park, Internet cafes and in countless train and bus stations.

I had trained fighters, carried spit buckets, cleaned gyms, penned articles for Internet boxing sites and was even a round card guy for women's fights – all with the objective of somehow making a life in boxing.

And I suppose that was the bizarre part; I had explored so many avenues I no longer had a grasp on what it was exactly I should focus on.

Wherever I was going, I wasn't going anywhere fast.

I was patient, of course. I had no choice. Time was not really an issue but considering it had been my brother's turn to sell his car for me to return to Atlantic City a few months later I really needed a result.

And that was when the phone rang...

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CRITICS dismissed Micky Ward as a clubfighter. Worse still, he had been referred to as a journeyman. If it took the amount of heart he had to be a clubfighter or journeyman then where did I have to sign? He was a warrior among warriors.

Better than that, he was one of the sport's stars in the aftermath of his exhilarating Fight of the Year win over fans' favourite Arturo Gatti.

It had thrust him into the limelight and at the International Boxing Hall of Fame weekend, a fortnight after their war, he had been the man everyone, fighters included, wanted to be seen with.

I wanted to learn his unforgiving left hook to the liver and inherit every piece of knowledge I could.

We had agreed that I'd visit Lowell in Massachusetts to train with him but Tony Connolly at *Boxing News* had other ideas. He'd heard about my plans and called, asking me to write a feature with 'Irish' Micky. In an instant everything changed. My sole focus was writing the piece and filing it rapidly.

I travelled through the night from Atlantic City on a Greyhound bus and was turfed out in New York for a couple of hours in the early stages of the morning, well before daybreak.

With two hours to kill, I threw my bag over my shoulder and explored. It was around 4am on Saturday night and Times Square was heaving. The bright flashing lights from illuminated advertising boards beamed in the intoxicated eyes of entranced tourists and loitering gangs.

My bag kept swinging into people and the humidity bothered me. After around 40 uncomfortable minutes I headed back to the cool surroundings of the deepest and darkest section of the enormous Port Authority bus terminal.

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I sat at my departure gate for a while and began to get nervous as the queue of people waiting for the ride to Boston grew. By the time I finally decided to join, it must have been about 30 strong and was quickly piling up behind me.

I knew I wouldn't have the luxury of a seat to myself.

It was this part of waiting I particularly hated. You started to eye up who you might sit next to and wrote mental shortlists about who you didn't want to be with and why. Very large people used more than their share of the seat. Tall folks required lots of leg room. Those wearing headphones played music too loudly. This was before you got on to any of the unsavoury-looking characters.

More often than not, the queue to board Greyhound buses looked like a police line-up.

On this occasion I was fortunate enough to get a window seat and it wasn't too near the toilets at the back. They had to be avoided at all costs if the odd whiff was anything to go by.

I had a student-type next to me. I didn't make eye contact with him to let him know I wouldn't be talking for the six-or-so-hour journey.

I would be trying to get some rest.

There was another two-hour layover in Boston, where I moved on to a Peter Pan bus for the final leg of the trip.

That final section of the journey, which took around three-quarters of an hour, wasn't as busy and there was some room to manoeuvre courtesy of a seat to myself; a welcome coup.

I wrote some questions down for 'Irish' Micky and called him to come and collect me from the bus station when I arrived at mid-morning. The sky was grey and drizzle filled the warm, moist air. Lowell was an industrial town that thrived in the fifties but had become run down. There were still nice areas but the mean streets more than lived up to their reputation.

Ward's gleaming black BMW pulled up, leaving a gentle spray of fresh rain in its wake. It was a smart-looking car, not flashy as you might expect of a boxer who had been a TV idol for a decade and who, for two years running, had been involved in *The Ring* magazine's Fight of the Year.

I'd met fighters who had frittered hard-earned funds on garages filled with needlessly fast cars, mansions, exotic pets and extravagant entourages made up of bumbling and largely

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disloyal hangers-on. I had seen images of Mike Tyson and his fleets of expensive vehicles. Zab Judah and Floyd Mayweather haemorrhaged millions on designer clothes and excessive bling.

Ward wore a plain long-sleeved grey Nike T-shirt, navy tracksuit bottoms and he had a baseball cap on back to front. The cut over his left eye, which he had sustained in his ferocious battle with his new friend Gatti, had healed and his bruised right hand was able to shake mine firmly. He greeted me with a warm smile and tossed my bag in the trunk of his car by its shoulder strap.

No one seemed to recognise him at the station and as we left I asked if that was normal.

'I used to get stopped all the time,' he smiled, obviously pleased to be given his own space. 'But they're used to me around here now.'

It was 18 May 2002, and I'd visited the Mohegan Sun in Uncansville, Connecticut, as a fight fan looking for kicks and expecting a war.

What actually happened exceeded my own heightened prophecies. Micky Ward and Arturo Gatti tore into one another like lions quarrelling over a steak.

For ten ferocious rounds they planted their feet and swung their fists. They banged each other's bodies until they were red and sent litres of sweat flying from their faces as they repeatedly rocked their heads back with wild lefts and rights.

The ninth round, 'The round of the century' as the great trainer Emanuel Steward roared while broadcasting from ringside, was magnificent. It was the ultimate guilty pleasure. Ward was under the heaviest of fire but turned the tide with his patented left hook to the body.

Gatti was downed, agony finally etched on a previously stoic and unflinching face.

He'd cracked first.

Some wondered whether the Canadian hero would survive. Those who knew the warrior within had no doubt he would try to make it back to his feet.

He did, only for an avalanche of leather to fly his way and he was in dire straits once more.

Meanwhile, in my cheap seat, fans who were standing on their chairs and leaping up and down, were high-fiving complete strangers. In the arena they were sharing something as unique

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as the fighters were in the ring. A bond had formed while the violence was unfolding, and two men smashing into one another, reversing and then doing it over and over was linking them all in one hedonistically exciting brotherhood.

Gatti somehow saw out the ninth round. He survived and, incredibly, they both pulled through to hear the final bell after the tenth.

The fighters were exhausted. The fans were left sweaty and hyperventilating. The atmosphere buzzed and Ward won by the narrowest of margins, that brutal knockdown being the punctuation mark that made the difference on the scorecards.

Less than a month later I was in Micky's front room and he was reliving it, saying he wanted to go through it all again with his new friend, Gatti.

'It's only another 40 minutes of torture,' he reasoned, a sickly grin creasing the cheeks of his unmarked face.

Those ten three-minute rounds had gone into the history books as one of the definitive ring struggles of the modern era, a throwback fight to the days of smaller gloves, longer fights and fewer medical provisions. Ward had endured his fair share of thrillers before, but the struggles with Emanuel Augustus, Antonio Diaz and Shea Neary had been wonderfully eclipsed. He was an uncomplicated, mellow man who could transform into a disturbed grizzly bear at the sound of the bell.

He was, in the business, labelled a warrior and that's all he really wanted.

'That means more to me than anything,' he said. 'I want to be remembered as someone who's honest, fought tough and never disrespected anyone.'

Now 36, he was prepared to quit fighting had he lost to Gatti. Instead, there was speculation over a world title fight with Kostya Tszyu although he was closer to landing a lucrative return with Gatti.

'Me and him, you know, it was supposed to be a great fight and it ended up being one. I always knew it would be exciting. He banged me around pretty good but I was so focused and if we fight again I'm just going to drag him right back into it, into the pain. I'm going to start fast and come out swinging from round one.'

It had been so close – and so viciously good – that the clamour for the rematch had intensified.

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Ward said he'd drawn confidence from experiences earlier in his career, and that lessons learned from previous losses helped earn him his biggest win.

'I look at it like it could have gone either way. Some rounds could have gone his way and some mine,' he explained of the outcome. 'People lose and they fall apart like it's the end of the world. They're never the same. But if you take a loss like a win and learn from it you come back stronger and it makes you a better fighter and person. I should know, I've had 11 of them.'

Micky showed me around his home, introducing me to his dogs, a Pekinese, a St Bernard and an English mastiff. His brother Dicky, a former fighter, lived in Lowell too, as did Micky's seven sisters.

The Gatti fight had been so well received Ward had even had a personal invitation to meet President George Bush at the White House.

'I live in a white house here,' he joked, 'but it's not as big. It's kind of unreal,' he added.

Ward realised, however, that the end game was nearing. The veteran's weary legs were growing older. The career had been hard.

'Two more fights at the most,' he shrugged. 'If everything goes well with this Gatti fight again and then one more big one, then we'll see. I take one fight at a time because any one could be my last.'

He knew the game. There are only so many last hurrahs a fighter can produce.

Several hours later, after taking the tour of Micky's home, meeting his fiancée Charlene, daughter Kasie and playing with the hounds, and after a quick lunch in a roadside sandwich bar, I was back at the station.

I completed the 700-mile round trip to Atlantic City on the buses, stopping once again in New York and when I arrived back in New Jersey I went to the library to type up and file the feature I had hand-written on the bus.

Tony at *Boxing News* seemed pleased enough.

'Oh, and by the way, Tris,' he said, his voice lifting towards the end of a brief chat. 'While you're out there, who else will you see?'

Just like that, my new journey had begun.